

ADVOCATING “DIGNITY” AND “RETURN” FOR LEBANON’S PALESTINIANS: IMAGINING A DIASPORIC PROJECT

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The 2010 reform of the legal regime regulating Palestinians’ access to the labour market in Lebanon ignited a heated debate among Lebanese, Palestinians, and international political actors. This article analyses the advocacy initiatives preceding the reform to answer the following question: what signifiers of Palestinian-ness have Palestinian political entrepreneurs mobilised? In a nutshell, it shows how a group of non-governmental organizations working with Palestinian refugees in Lebanon re-shaped the references to “Return” and “Dignity” in order to create an intellectual environment favourable to their demands for legal reform. However, these two signifiers not only concern the issue of the work-related rights of Lebanon’s Palestinians, but they also envisage a specific form of emplacement of the Palestinian community in that country. From this perspective, they are the constitutive elements of a “diasporic project” of emplacement in which Palestinians collectively exist in an in-between (imagined) space situated somewhere between their host society and their homeland.

Keywords: Palestinian refugees, diaspora, advocacy, Lebanon

1. Introduction

On 17 August 2010, the Lebanese Parliament approved some modifications of the legal regime regulating foreigners’ access to the labour market explicitly designed for Lebanon’s Palestinians. This vote marked an important evolution in Lebanese-Palestinian coexistence by crystallising two narratives of this coexistence into a formal law-like compromise – which respectively opposed and supported the abovementioned reform. More precisely, as I will demonstrate in the following pages, these narratives not only constitute the main arguments

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used by Lebanese and Palestinian collective actors to support or oppose the proposals of legal reform, but they also shape the intellectual boundaries of this debate. Given their crucial role in shaping the subsequent legal and political discussion, this article describes and analyses these narratives focusing on two of their constitutive elements in particular. Any narrative on the Palestinian presence in Lebanon is based on both (normative) visions of what the Palestinian community is/should be and (normative) visions of how it is/should be connected to the Lebanese host society. Otherwise said, any narrative is built upon different sets of signifiers of the Palestinian displacement from the ancestral homeland and of the Palestinian emplacement in Lebanon. These signifiers are the main symbolic elements put forward in the political imagination of the Palestinian collective presence in Lebanon.

Since 1948, several signifiers have been elaborated and re-elaborated to point to the Palestinian presence in Lebanon as a single, homogenous, bounded group of individuals: exile, refugee-ness, armed struggle, criminality, political Islam, and social exclusion, among others. By looking into the signifiers produced and diffused by Palestinian collective actors during the debate that preceded the parliamentary vote, I aim to explore one fundamental question: how Lebanon's Palestinians (or at least some of them) depict their permanence on the Lebanese territory/in Lebanese society in the second decade of the 21st century.

After introducing the historic evolution of the legal framework that regulates Palestinians' access to the formal labour market and the main actors involved in the debate concerning its reform, I analyse the processes of symbolic production activated by the Palestinian mobilisation in favour of reforming the existing legal framework before August 2010 in the second section of the article. In the third section, I explore the connections between the representations and the symbols produced in favour of the reform of the legal framework, and the representations and symbols used to oppose any reform. There, I exploit the emplacement-displacement dichotomy¹ to explore how the above-mentioned representation and symbols can be conceived as elements of a "diasporic project"² used in the struggle over the meaning of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon. In the conclusion, I attempt to problematise the in-between-ness of this "diasporic project" by comparing the features of the struggle engaging Lebanon's Palestinian with other diasporic project-driven struggles as presented in the theoretical literature.

¹ This dichotomy was introduced in the study of displacement by Lisa Malkki in her seminal article about the construction of the knowledge frameworks used to manage refugees cf. L. Malkki, "Refugees and Exile: From 'Refugee Studies' to the National Order of Things", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24, 1995, 515–516.

² Concerning the notion of "diasporic project", I draw on Brubaker's concluding remarks on the (inflated) use of the concept of Diaspora. More precisely, I accept his suggestion to conceive Diaspora and (potentially) diasporic narratives: "as a category of practice, project, claim and stance, rather than as a bounded group. The 'groupness' of putative diasporas [...] is precisely what is at stake in [political, social and cultural] struggles." R. Brubaker, "The 'diaspora' diaspora", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28(1), 2005, 13.

The corpus of data upon which this article is based was collected during 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork involving semi-directed interviews, participant observation sessions, and documental research. During this period, my role evolved in the eyes of my informants. Chronologically, I have been an academic researcher, a foreign volunteer working in a non-governmental organization (NGO) (namely Association Najdeh), a conference speaker, and an acquaintance. Of course, the quality and quantity of my inquiry was influenced by each of these positions in the field, which opened certain doors to me and closed others. A second limitation stemmed from the selection process of the most pertinent events among the imaginative, political, and legal phenomena that are the subjects of this article. For the sake of clarity, I limit myself to the description and analysis of the symbolic dimensions relative to the legal reform. Other dimensions, such as the fragmentation of Palestinian political parties and NGOs leading to competing mobilisations, have not been discussed in this article. However, these dimensions have been exhaustively explored elsewhere.³

2. Palestinian legal status and work-related rights in Lebanon (1959–2005)

2.1. Legal instruments shaping Palestinians' status

The complex history of Palestinian displacement inside Lebanon and the legal measures taken to regulate it is beyond the scope of this study.⁴ However, it is useful to mention the constitutive elements of the regime regulating Palestinians' access to the Lebanese labour market to fully understand the framework of the debates on the reform. While in 1948 a ministerial decree established a committee in charge of registering the refugees, known as the Central Committee for Palestine refugees' affairs, Palestinians were initially considered as foreigners – i.e. any individual not fulfilling the criteria set by Lebanese law. Not until 1959 did the Lebanese Government create a specific directorate for Palestinian affairs inside the Ministry of the Interior and adopt specific procedures targeting Palestinian refugees, such as Decision No. 319.⁵ Under this decision, individuals registered with the directorate were considered stateless, free to move inside Lebanon and exempt from the obligation of obtaining a residency visa.

³ The most insightful studies about these dimensions have been authored by Sari Hanafi. See S. Hanafi, "Al-huquq al-madaniyya li-l-filastiniyyin fi lubnan: al-ḥamla wa al-ḥamla al-maddada", *majala al-dirasat al-filastiniyya*, 21(83), 2010, 30–43. S. Hanafi, "Al-Huquq al-madaniyya wa al-ijtimaiyya-iqtisaddiya al-filastiniyya fi lubnan; al-ḥamla wa al-ḥamla al-maddada", *majala al-dirasat al-filastiniyya* (trad. *Journal of Palestinian Studies*), 21(83), 2010.

⁴ What is more, accurate accounts of this displacement have already been written. See M. Kamel-Dorai, *Les réfugiés palestiniens du Liban. Une géographie de l'exile*, Paris, CNRS éditions, 2006; J. Sfeir, *L'exil palestinien au Liban : le temps des origines (1947-1952)*, Paris/Beyrouth/Karthala, IFPO, 2008.

⁵ This Interior Minister's decision created an *ad-hoc* category – which included registered refugees – not submitted to the constraints listed in the law of 10 Jul. 1962 about the circulation and residency of foreigners in Lebanon.

In the 1960s, these freedoms were countered by the constraints imposed by the Lebanese authorities on foreigners' economic activities, which indirectly affected the Palestinians. In 1964, Decree No. 17561 obligated all foreigners to obtain work permits from the Ministry of Labour, with no exception for refugees. Thus, Palestinians were required to obtain a yearly work permit. The same act imposed affiliation with a professional association as a prerequisite to practice a number of professions. Since the rules of most Lebanese professional associations⁶ require an applicant for membership to hold Lebanese citizenship,⁷ Palestinians were prevented from accessing liberal professions. Finally, because of the reciprocity clause included in the 1963 Social Security Law, Palestinians were also excluded from all kinds of work leave (maternity, illness, work accident, occupational) and end-of-service compensation payments.⁸

Even though these restrictions were *de facto* suspended between 1969 and 1982⁹ because of the entry into force of the Cairo Agreement,¹⁰ the situation drastically worsened after the 1982 Israeli invasion. Following this, a number of reforms were passed to further restrain Palestinian access to the Lebanese labour market: Ministerial Decision No. 1/289, issued in 1982, prevented non-Lebanese from being hired in a list of clerical and manual positions; in 1987 the Lebanese Parliament voted for the abolition of the Cairo Agreement; in 1990 the Constitutional amendments approved in Ta'if banned any form of naturalisation (*tawṭyn*);¹¹ finally, in 1995, the Labour Minister's Decision 621/1 added 50 professions to the list of jobs forbidden to non-Lebanese.

In 2005, this trend was partially reversed by the Labour Minister's Memorandum No. 67/1, which reduced the number of clerical and manual

⁶ Among others, lawyers', doctors', and engineers' associations.

⁷ Alternatively, affiliation may be granted to nationals of States that grant the same access rights to Lebanese under a legal dispositive known as the reciprocity clause.

⁸ For a complete overview concerning these issues, see cf. S. El-Natour & D. Yassine, *The Legal Status of the Palestine Refugees in Lebanon and the Demands of Adjustment*, Beirut, Human Development Center (HDC) and Canadian International Development Research Center (IRDC), 2007, 110.

⁹ In terms of labour demand, the arrival of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in Lebanon created a quasi-public sector hiring of almost exclusively Palestinian refugees, as had already occurred in the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Under the banner of the armed resistance (*muqawama*) leading to return to Palestine (*'awda*) and the fulfilment of the Palestinian cause (*qadya filastyniya*), both political parties' military wings and the non-military organizations depending on the PLO hired massively among Palestinians. R. Sayigh, "Palestinians in Lebanon: Harsh Present, Uncertain Future", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 25(1), 1995; cf. Y. Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: the Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997.

¹⁰ About the impact of the Cairo Agreement on the everyday Palestinian existence in Lebanon, see A. Knudsen, "Widening the Protection Gap: the 'Politics of Citizenship' for Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon, 1948-2008", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 22(1), 2009, 55.

¹¹ In explicitly refusing the naturalisation of Palestinians in the most important piece of law of the Lebanese state, the leaders gathered in Ta'if justified their attitude by emphasising their support for Palestinians' return (*'awda*) to their country. However, as correctly argued by Chaaban et al.: "The Lebanese position on return to Palestine is sometimes used to justify discriminatory policies against the Palestinian refugees...." J. Chaaban & H. Ghattas & R.R. Habib & S. Hanafi & N. Sahyoun & N. Salti & K. Seyfert & N. Naamani, *Socio-Economic Survey of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon*, Beirut, AUB-UNRWA, 2010, available at <http://www.unrwa.org/userfiles/2011012074253.pdf> (last visited 9 Nov. 2012).

jobs forbidden to Palestinians.¹² At the same time, the Prime Minister created the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee – a body in charge of dealing with security-related and rights-related aspects of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon. After the establishment of the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC), many other initiatives were undertaken at different levels to tackle the issues of Palestinian rights in Lebanon – not the first time such efforts had been undertaken. The unilateral abrogation of the Cairo Agreement resulted in a legal gap concerning the protection and duties of Palestinians resident in Lebanon. A first attempt to remedy this situation occurred in 1991 when meetings took place between Lebanese representatives and Palestinian political representatives,¹³ but without any practical results.¹⁴

2.2. Main collective actors supporting the enhancement of Palestinians' right to employment

After 2005, several initiatives aimed at the enhancement of Palestinians' rights were launched. Through these initiatives, the advocates of Palestinian rights – namely the PLO, the UNRWA, Palestinian and foreign NGOs, and some foreign (European) governments – engaged Lebanese decision-making instances on three levels.

At the diplomatic level, the official Lebanese-Palestinian communication channel was re-opened in 2006 thanks to a Lebanese decision to allow the establishment of a PLO representation office in Beirut. The renewed diplomatic relations entailed an increase in contact between the Palestinian Authority and Lebanese Government officials, mostly at the ministerial level, with the former asking for the recognition of basic rights for Lebanon's Palestinians. Beyond that, some international organizations became engaged in pressuring the Lebanese Government through high-level confidential contacts.¹⁵

At the Lebanese level, advocacy initiatives focused more specifically on the issue of the right to employment. One of these is the Follow-up Committee for the Employment of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon (FCEP) – created at the end of 2006 through funding from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation in cooperation with the Lebanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the UNRWA. This consultative body originally included representatives from the Lebanese ministries concerned with Palestinians' employment,¹⁶

¹² J. Suleiman, *Marginalised Community: The Case of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon*, Brighton, Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty - University of Sussex, 30, 2006, available at: http://www.migrationdrc.org/publications/research_reports/JaberEdited.pdf (last visited 13 Jul. 2013).

¹³ These individuals belonged to the PLO and to the *Tahaluf*. The Fatah-led PLO controlled the refugee camps in southern Lebanon, while the pro-Syrian factions grouped in the *Tahaluf* (in English, the coalition) were in charge of the security of the camps in Beirut, the Bekaa, and northern Lebanon.

¹⁴ J. Suleiman, "The Current Political, Organizational, and Security Situation in the Palestinian Refugee Camps of Lebanon", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 29(1), 1999, 69.

¹⁵ Interview with a UN officer, Beirut, 10 Jun. 2010.

¹⁶ I.e. the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Labour.

representatives from Lebanese and Palestinian civil societies,¹⁷ a PLO representative, and a high-ranking UNRWA officer. The main purpose of this committee is “to establish that the employment of Palestinian refugees and better working conditions is a win-win scenario for both the Palestinians and the Lebanese”.¹⁸

At the “civil society” level – in addition to the committee including members from both governmental and non-governmental institutions mentioned above – a number of non-profit, non-governmental organizations engaged in the provision of welfare services and advocacy on behalf of Lebanon's Palestinians started public campaigns specifically promoting Palestinians' right to employment. Most of the organizations engaged in these campaigns belong to the group of associations labelled “Palestinian NGOs”.¹⁹ After 2005, these NGOs, through advocacy campaigns, started to put pressure, individually (as in the case of Palestinian Human Rights Organization (PHRO), *Thabit*, and *Shahyd*) or collectively (as in the case of the Coalition for the Right to Work led by Association Najdeh and Norwegian People's Aid (NPA), or via the FCEP), on the Lebanese authorities to reform the legal regime regulating Palestinians' access to the labour market. The majority of these campaigns were financed by *ad-hoc* donations provided by foreign NGOs.²⁰ Furthermore, these campaigns were coupled with foreign NGOs' pressure on European governments to lobby for Palestinians' rights through diplomatic channels.

All of these collective actors played a role in the 5 years that preceded the 3-month-long parliamentary debate that led to the vote on the reform of the legal regime regulating Palestinians' access to the labour market. Whereas most of them contributed to the agenda setting process, it hardly seems possible to

¹⁷ Namely a retired Lebanese ambassador and the director of the Norwegian People's Aid; NPA is a Norwegian NGO. Its local branch has been very active inside Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon since 1982.

¹⁸ Quote from the “Home” section of the CEP website: CEP, “Committee for the Employment of the Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon – Home”, available at: <http://www.cep-lb.org/index.html> (last visited 1 Jan. 2012).

¹⁹ This category, originally conceived by Jaber Suleiman, includes: “legally Lebanese NGOs, they are in reality Palestinian associations. Although they nominally offer their services to the needy of both communities, their work is concentrated in refugee camps and other Palestinian areas. Since Palestinians in Lebanon have no right to form autonomous associations, they organize associations in which Lebanese citizens comprise the general assembly and administrative committees. While the nominal leadership is comprised of Lebanese citizens, however, the executive bodies of these NGOs usually include Palestinian activists. These NGOs, while legally indistinguishable from Lebanese NGOs, are therefore *de facto* ‘Palestinian NGOs’.” J. Suleiman, “Palestinians in Lebanon and the Role of Non-governmental Organizations”, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 10(3), 1997, 401. The boundaries of this category need to be reassessed by integrating recent contributions developed in the study of non-governmental organizations elsewhere in the Middle East, relief and service provision no longer being the only activities undertaken by non-governmental actors. In the 1980s, a new generation of organizations engaged in contentious actions aimed at the promotion of individual and collective rights: S. Ben Néfissa, “Associations et ONG dans le monde arabe: vers la mise en place d'une problématique”, in S. Ben Néfissa & S. Hanafi, *Pouvoirs et associations dans le monde arabe*, Paris, CNRS Editions, 2002, 26–27. In Lebanon, this evolution occurred in the late 1990s and led to the emergence of collective actors which – unlike the “original” Palestinian NGOs such as Najdeh, Beit Atfal Assumud, and NPA, among others – focused only on the defence and promotion of Palestinians' rights without getting engaged in service provision. The PHRO, Ai'dun-Center for Refugee Rights, the Palestinian Organization for the Right to Return-*Thabit*, and the Palestinian Association for Human Rights-Witness/*Shahyd* all belong to this new generation of Palestinian NGOs.

²⁰ More often than not, these foreign NGOs were the main donors to Palestinian NGOs.

measure whether Palestinian NGOs have been more or less effective in obtaining compliance from Lebanese authorities than the PLO, the UNRWA, and foreign governments. However, this is not the point to prove. What I will illustrate in the next section is that the Palestinian NGOs' contribution shaped the boundaries of the political debate by creating the corpus of knowledge used to represent the Palestinian presence in Lebanon through certain themes strictly related to very specific forms of emplacement and displacement.

Finally, it has to be pointed out that the processes of symbolic production did not move forward linearly from the establishment of the LPDC to the 17 August 2012 vote. On the one hand, they sped up when diplomatic pressures from some European governments and international organizations increased Lebanese institutional sensitivity to the issue of Palestinian employment, especially in view of the negotiations for the Lebanon-EU association treaty. On the other hand, a series of events distracted both the Lebanese authorities and Palestinian NGOs. The 2006 war with Israel, the crises of national unity governments, the destruction of the Nahr el-Bared refugee camp, and the intra-Lebanese armed clashes diverted attention to other issues and hindered the advancement of the Palestinians' employment rights. However, between 2005 and 2010, Palestinian NGOs continued to produce and diffuse statistical reports and other forms of knowledge concerning the employment conditions of Lebanon's Palestinians.

3. Reshaping the representation of the Palestinian community via the debate over Palestinians' right to work in Lebanon: the NGO contribution

The following four quotes are very powerful examples of the two points I will develop throughout this section: first, I argue that the Palestinian NGOs produced converging representations of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon. Second, I contend that these representations shaped the intellectual boundaries of the imaginative processes underpinning collective actions and experts' debates concerning the reform initiatives mentioned in the previous section.

3.1. The NGOs-produced, converging representations of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon

The first quote opens a research paper authored by Jaber Suleiman, an independent Palestinian researcher and the founder of Ai'dun:²¹

Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are perhaps the most unfortunate and destitute grouping of Palestinian refugees in any Arab host country. They

²¹ Ai'dun-Center for Refugee Rights is a Palestinian NGO established by former PLO activists in 1999. Its activities mainly concern defence of and education about the right of return in Lebanon and Syria through the production and diffusion of written material on the issue and participation in public events.

are deprived of almost all civil rights and subjected to various forms of marginalization – spatial, institutional and economic – and this marginalization is often linked to exclusion and violence.²²

The second one comes from *Working Unprotected: Contributions of Palestinian Refugees Residing in Camps & Some Gatherings To the Lebanese Economy*, a survey published by the Association Najdeh,²³ and opens the section “Current information on Contributions of Palestinian refugees to the Lebanese economy”:

More than two generations of Palestinian refugees have since the Nakba of 1948 been born and raised in Lebanon. They resided in the country, received education, worked, and spent their incomes and their lives in Lebanon. [...] Such a dynamic necessitated a unique interaction with the Lebanese economy similar but not identical with that of the Lebanese with their own economy. The basic difference is that Palestinians are refugees and there are legal barriers to their work and other civil liberties that do not exist for other refugees. Such barriers constitute an infringement on their human rights and are associated with a substandard living.²⁴

The third quote is included in the introductory section of *Lebanese Labour Laws... Palestinian Refugees Recent Situations. The Palestinians' Contribution to the Lebanon's Economy* published by the PHRO:²⁵

From our point of view, any attempt to tackle the general situation of the Palestinians who have been dispersed as refugees in many neighboring Arab countries, will clearly show that Palestinians were affected and thus reflected the social profile of their host countries [...] The most tough events and circumstances were encountered by Palestinian refugees in Lebanon; their repercussions are still shaping the refugees' overall situation [...].²⁶

²² J. Suleiman, *Marginalised Community: The Case of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon*, Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty, University of Sussex, 30.

²³ Association Najdeh activities started in 1976 after the destruction of Tal el-Zaatar camp. Its founders and leaders are close to the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) and were originally engaged in providing welfare services to Tal el-Zaatar widows and orphans. Besides service provision in all Lebanese camps, this NGO started its advocacy activities – focusing on the right to employment, domestic violence, and the right of return – in the first half of the 2000s. Its main funders are a few (formerly faith-based) European NGOs.

²⁴ A. al-Khalidi, *Working Unprotected. Contributions of Palestinian Refugees Residing in Camps & Some Gatherings To the Lebanese Economy* Beirut, Association Najdeh, 138, 2009, available at: <http://www.association-najdeh.org/pdf/Presenting%20the%20result%20of%20Palestinian%20refugees/Working%20Unprotected.pdf> (last visited 9 Nov. 2012).

²⁵ PHRO was established in 1997 and aims to protect and promote the human rights of Lebanon's Palestinians. It belongs to the second wave of Palestinian NGOs and works mainly via advocacy initiatives funded by Northern European governmental and non-governmental partners.

²⁶ PHRO, *Lebanese Labor Laws... Palestinian Refugees Recent Situations. The Palestinians' Contribution to the Lebanon's Economy*, Beirut, Palestinian Human Rights Organization-PHRO, 2009, 6, available

The final quote opens the “Background” section of a report published by the Follow-up Committee for the Employment of the Palestinians (FCEP)²⁷ under the title *Mapping Palestinian Refugee Employment 2007*:

There are currently around 406,324 registered Palestine refugees in Lebanon with UNRWA, [...] Around 200,000 refugees live in twelve official camps in addition to scattered gatherings in South Lebanon. Official restrictions imposed on the employment of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon have always been an obstacle preventing them from participating normally in the Lebanese labour market. These restrictions, against a background of high unemployment rates currently prevailing in Lebanon aggravated by political instability and conflicts has led to a further deterioration of the employment situation of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and thus worsening their living conditions.²⁸

These four quotations present three similarities: first, they usually initiate a section or a paragraph defining the main characteristics of the Palestinian community in Lebanon. Otherwise said, they are meant to provide the reader with the essential characteristics of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon. What is more, they are all originally drafted in English. Whereas Suleiman’s paper, the Najdeh survey, and the PHRO report were only drafted in English, the FCEP text exists in both English and Arabic. Therefore, it seems safe to assume that the first three documents target mainly an English-speaking audience that is unaware or poorly informed about the Palestinian refugees’ situation in Lebanon – such as freshly-posted international organizations officers, western diplomats, and foreign NGO staff. The FCEP text, as the majority of the texts available in Arabic and English, targets Lebanese decision- and opinion-makers, such as members of Parliament, party leaders, journalists, and militant intellectuals,²⁹ in addition to the groups of professionals mentioned beforehand.

Second, all of the quotes posit the same essential characteristics of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon: the refugee-ness of Palestinians and the deprivation of their rights leading to poor living conditions and marginalisation/exclusion. These characteristics depict the Palestinian collective existence through two signifiers: one about the displacement from Palestine and the other about the emplacement in Lebanon. Concerning displacement, the reference to refugee-ness highlights the connection between Lebanon’s Palestinians and their lost homeland on the one hand and with the other Palestinian communities on the other. The reference to the uniqueness of the Palestinian nation is further

at: <http://www.palhumanrights.org/rtw%20campaign/Right-to-work/Labor%20Study-English.pdf> (last visited 9 Nov. 2012).

²⁷ In 2009, Committee members decided to eliminate “Follow-up” and renamed this informal body Committee for the Employment of the Palestinians (CEP). For more information about its establishment and composition, see footnote 13 above.

²⁸ FCEP, *Mapping Palestinian Refugee employment 2007*, Beirut, UNRWA-FCEP, 22, 2007, available at: http://fcep-lb.org/pdf/Mapping_palestinian_workshop_2007.pdf (last visited 8 Nov. 2012).

²⁹ The targeted audience can be inferred from the organization’s official objective, see above footnote 13.

strengthened by comparing Lebanon's Palestinians with Palestinians elsewhere.³⁰ This being said, Lebanon's Palestinians and the other Palestinian refugees are not entirely alike. The distinction is brought forward in the second unity-signifying theme of the quotes: the deprivation of basic human rights leading to "substandard" living conditions. The reference to a mix of discriminatory legal and economic situations represents a relatively new element in the history of the signifiers of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon. Even though poor living conditions and refugee camps have already been used in Palestinian nationalist mythology,³¹ this image was not directly related to the deprivation of human rights, but to the loss of the Palestinian homeland – at least before 1982.

Finally, these documents and their narratives are all produced, published, and diffused either by Palestinian NGOs or by groups which include Palestinian NGOs as members, such as the FCEP. The actual authors of these narratives of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon outlined in these quotes are key figures in Palestinian NGOs who are ideologically close to the PLO parties and economically dependent on foreign donors.³² They also have similar profiles mixing political engagement with training in research institutions, as in the cases of Jaber Suleiman and Aziza al-Khalidi.

In conclusion, the Palestinian NGO-created reports (to which these quotes belong) provide the reader – regardless of being an English-speaking foreigner involved in development cooperation targeting Palestinians or an Arabic-speaking decision-/opinion-maker – with a representation of the Palestinians as a homogenous group of refugees who, because of the deprivation of their basic rights, are forced to live in dreadful living conditions.

3.2. *The diffusion of NGO-produced representations and the intellectual debate on the legal reform*

In order to demonstrate that these representations have shaped the intellectual boundaries of the collective actions and experts' debates concerning the reform initiatives, I take an epistemological stance similar to James Ferguson's concerning World Bank reports on Lesotho.³³ Hence, I do not take the documents mentioned above as exact representations of social reality, but as tools handled by collective actors in pursuing their perceived interests and their envisaged political projects. Therefore, I believe it is important to ask when, by whom,

³⁰ Indeed, this comparison can be done only if one assumes the internal homogeneity of Palestinian communities scattered in the region, as Suleiman's paper, the Najdeh survey, and the PHRO report do.

³¹ Cf. J. Peteet, *Landscape of Hope and Despair: Palestinian Refugee Camps*, Philadelphia, PENN, 2005, 142.

³² This is true not only for the mentioned quotes. The same signifiers may be found in the surveys, reports, and press releases elaborated by Palestinian NGOs ideologically close to Hamas and the *Tahaluf*. As Youssef (a staff member of one of these NGOs) once stated, their documents aim to make the public aware of the refugees' suffering due to Palestinians' exclusion from the labour market. Interview with Youssef, 30 Jun. 2011, Beirut.

³³ Cf. J. Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development", Depoliticization and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, Cambridge/New York/Port Chester, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

how, and to whom these documents – and the representations they convene – have been actually diffused after their elaboration.

Three types of events favoured the diffusion of these reports in the public space: public presentations held by the organizations publishing the reports, specialist gatherings (such as academic conferences and expert roundtables) concerning access to the labour market for Lebanon's Palestinians, and the mobilisations linked to the 2010 campaign advocating the improvement of Palestinians' access to the labour market. Each pattern differs from the others in terms of: (1) specific transmission dynamics of the representation of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon; (2) different targeted audiences; and (3) varying objectives of the transmitting actor(s). Interestingly, the transmitted content – i.e. the positive economic impact of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon – stays the same.

The first type of diffusion activity consists mainly of public events organized by the reports' publishers. The public presentations of the Najdeh report, organized between the end of 2009 and the beginning of 2010, are concrete examples of these kinds of activities. In these meetings, the Najdeh director and the author of the study presented the Najdeh report at the local and national level by engaging mayors, ministers, and Lebanese Members of Parliament (MPs) in meetings in Beirut, Sidon, and Tyr.³⁴ The meetings were attended by the Information Minister Tarek Mitri, MPs from Amal, the Future Movement, the Popular Nasserite Organization, and local administrations' representatives, among others. Similarly, the Committee for the Employment of the Palestinians (CEP) workshop, organized in 2007 in Beirut to present its *Mapping Palestinian Refugee Employment*, engaged several UNRWA and foreign embassies' staff along with representatives of Lebanese ministries and directors of Palestinian NGOs.³⁵ In his opening statement, the chair of the CEP³⁶ declared: "This recommendation [to produce and diffuse knowledge] is the result of a realization that though Palestinian refugees in the workplace are a fact of everyday life, this employment remains, to a great extent, a grey area which needs assessing."³⁷

The main aim of these activities was to give visibility to the report (and its publisher) among donors, decision-makers, and Lebanese political organizations. The targeted audience consisted of journalists, representatives of the Lebanese authorities, diplomats, cooperation agency officers, UNRWA staff, and members of other NGOs. Finally, these activities allowed the reports – and the convened images – to simply exist in the public space.

³⁴ Association Najdeh, "Presenting the result of Palestinian refugees' contribution in the Lebanese economy", available at: http://association-najdeh.org/results_of_r2w.htm (last visited 28 Feb. 2010). Another meeting between Najdeh director and Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) representatives took place in April in Beirut, interview with Najdeh employee, 15 Jul. 2010, Beirut.

³⁵ The list of participants is included in Annex 4 of the report. (FCER, *Mapping Palestinian Refugee Employment 2007*, 22.)

³⁶ Namely, retired ambassador Samir al-Khoury.

³⁷ The whole opening statement can be found in Annex 1 of the report. (FCER, *Mapping Palestinian Refugee Employment 2007*, 22.)

The second type includes public conferences and experts' workshop, such as the conference "Employment of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon: Labour Market Realities within the Political and Legal Framework" at the American University of Beirut (AUB). In the opening speech of this event, the Issam Fares Institute³⁸ Director, Rami Khouri, stated that one of the challenges lying ahead for research on Palestinians and their employment is "to pin down reality, if there is one".³⁹ Indeed, this reality also constituted the main preoccupation of the conference's second panel – which dealt with Palestinians' access to the formal labour market. There, two AUB professors debated the differences between the Palestinian unemployment rates obtained through quantitative surveys and qualitative studies. In the discussion, they made reference to a 2003 FAFO⁴⁰ survey about the living conditions of Lebanon's Palestinians, one of the main sources of the FCEP report mentioned above. Moreover, in the question and answer session which followed, Aziza Khalidi – the head researcher with Najdeh and formerly responsible for the FAFO survey in the field – brought forward the Najdeh report to support her point on the lack of reliable figures about Palestinian employment.⁴¹ Sari Hanafi (an AUB professor actively engaged in the promotion of Palestinians' rights) and Imam Khazaal (the representative of the Labour Ministry at the FCEP) acknowledged the existence of the Najdeh report and praised it for its quality. During the concluding discussion of the "Options for Lobbying and Advocacy" roundtable, the Najdeh director voiced her concerns about the actual diffusion of the research advocating Palestinian rights and called for more effective pressure on AUB alumni involved in the political institutional sphere. Similar exchanges occurred at the closed-door roundtable organized at the Prime Minister's Office by the head of the LPDC in July 2010. There, the first two invited speakers were Jaber Suleiman, the author of the first report quoted above, and Souheil al-Natour, who, along with Dalal Yassine, co-authored another widely quoted study on the legal constraints on Lebanon's Palestinians in 2007. According to several roundtable participants, their interventions were supposed to illustrate their studies and research about the legal restrictions to Palestinians' access to the labour market and their effects on the living condition of the Palestinian community. On the basis of these presentations, roundtable members were supposed to come up with sound reform proposals.

Generally speaking, the linear narrative transmission from the speakers to the audience that characterised the presentations of the reports is replaced by a circularity in which experts contribute to the creation of "hard facts" with the

³⁸ The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs is an AUB research centre that launched several research projects focusing on Palestinian camps from 2006 onwards.

³⁹ This quote, as well as the following descriptions, draws upon my observation notes. Fieldwork journal entry, 26 Apr. 2010, Beirut.

⁴⁰ Fafo-Institute for Applied International Studies is a Norwegian research institution very active in researching issue related to the Peace Process in the Middle East.

⁴¹ Actually, she contested the idea that the number of work permits issued by the Ministry of Labour represents a sound indicator of the employment rate.

purpose of guiding the decision-making process carried out by Lebanese decision-makers. Significantly, in both anecdotes data from different reports were confronted and opposed with the aim of providing individuals in charge of drafting the reform with an adequate basis of knowledge. Thus, it is not surprising that the targeted receivers are Lebanese politicians and civil servants in charge of regulating Palestinians' access to the labour market. In the end, through this modality, or pattern of diffusion, the mentioned reports acquire the status of shared references that orient the debate among experts and set the intellectual boundaries of the political debate.

The third type of diffusion activities includes mass-mobilising events related to the reform of the legal regime regulating Palestinians' access to the labour market. The most important among them, at least in terms of mobilised participants,⁴² has been the march for the civil and economic rights of the Palestinians on 27 June 2010 in Beirut. The preparation of this event started in February of that year, when an organizing committee – formed by representatives of most Palestinian NGOs⁴³ and non-affiliated activists – was created to set up an advocacy campaign that culminated in a rally. The initiative was intended by some members of the organizing committee to be supported by a representation that counters the existing one, named hereafter the Lebanese mainstream representation.⁴⁴ As Ghassam stated, this is necessary to have an impact on Lebanese authorities' attitude:

[...] Because they [the Lebanese] said we have a bad effect on the economy. Ok. Let's see if we have a bad or a good effect on the economy. Because here they don't understand if you talk only about the rights. We should talk about the [...] *al-musa'ada* (trans.: the contribution), you know. They should feel that Palestinians support the economy, that this is good for the Lebanese economy, you know, *bisa'ada al-dawr al-³iqtiṣādiya* (trans: it helps the economic cycle).⁴⁵

⁴² On 27 June, thousands of individuals marched from the Sports' city to the city center and presented a petition for the improvement of Palestinian rights to the Lebanese Parliament.

⁴³ Among others, Najdeh and PHRO. Several NGOs withdrew their support for the committee and the march itself. The most evident absence was one of the Palestinian NGOs ideologically close to Hamas. They withdrew from the committee a few weeks before the march and organized a sit-in on their own on 26 June.

⁴⁴ Whereas it is true that the Lebanese have varying perceptions of the Palestinian presence, one cannot deny that in the institutional political sphere one specific narrative is shared by all sides – with the exemption of Jumblatt's PSP. In a nutshell, in the mainstream representation the threat of naturalization (*tawṭyn*) is used as a scarecrow to prevent any improvement of the legal status of the Palestinians. J. Chaaban et al., *Socio-Economic Survey of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon*, Beirut, AUB-UNRWA, 2010. A more in-depth discussion about this narrative is included in the next session, but for more developed accounts, see D. Meier, *Mariages et identité nationale au Liban : les relations libano-palestiniennes dans le Liban de Ta'ef (1989-2005)*, Genève/Paris, Institut de hautes études internationales et du développement; Karthala, 2008; R. Bocco & J. Al-Husseini, "The Status of the Palestinian Refugees in the Near East: the Right of Return and UNRWA in Perspective", *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 28(2–3), 2010, 264–265.

⁴⁵ Interview with Ghassam, 8 Jun. 2011, Beirut. Ghassam is a fictitious name that I gave to this informant to protect their anonymity.

Ghassam's claim that the new narrative has to be based on concrete facts – such as economic arguments – rather than on an exclusively rights-based approach resonates with the position held by 'Ali. He explained how the organization of the rally started:

Often you need to create a certain narrative to support you. One, one of the things we don't have [is] a clear obvious narrative everyone agrees on. So, there is . . . we did so big meetings [sic] with all the people that work on the issue like Souheil al-Natour, like Jaber Suleiman and we started to see what kind [. . .] you have to offer an alternative if you want to do a legislation [. . .] So these people did so many researches [sic] and we tried to create two narratives: one for the legislator and one for the people, Lebanese and Palestinians. [sic]⁴⁶

In the same conversation, 'Ali outlined the sources of the data used by the organizing committee to build the new narrative, which included the Najdeh and PHRO reports as well as the documents published by the CEP and the International Labour Organization's (ILO) local office.⁴⁷ Through the organizing committee's campaign, the narrative included in the reports – which portrays Palestinians in Lebanon as refugees who are forced into dire living conditions because of the deprivation of their basic rights – was translated into the discursive practices (such as the slogans, flyers, etc.) used during the rally and the other advocacy-related events.⁴⁸

For instance, the main slogan of the rally, repeated during the demonstration by all participants and written centrally in the flyers calling for people's participation, said "*Bidna na'aysh bi-l-karama li-n'awd*".⁴⁹ The two main themes/topics of the new narrative (i.e., Return/*'awda* and Dignity/*karama*) appeared clearly in the elaboration phase of the slogan. Indeed, during the committee meeting in which the slogan was formulated, two proposals were put forward: *bidna na'aysh li-n'awd*⁵⁰ and *bidna na'aysh bi-l-karama*.⁵¹ Refusing to forgo either one or the other, committee members agreed to melt the two proposed refrains into one.⁵²

While the translation of the main elements of the NGO-produced narrative into the keywords Return/*'awda* and Dignity/*karama* created a bridge with the signifiers used in the height of the Palestinian nationalism in Lebanon,

⁴⁶ Interview with 'Ali, 8 Jul. 2011, Beirut. 'Ali is a fictitious name that I gave to this informant to protect their anonymity.

⁴⁷ Interview with 'Ali, 8 Jul. 2011, Beirut.

⁴⁸ The committee produced press releases, called for press conferences, organized expert workshops, etc. These events belong to the previous two patterns of diffusion and are not considered in this portion of the text.

⁴⁹ "We want to live in dignity so that we will return" in English. Observation notes, 27 Jun. 2010, Beirut.

⁵⁰ Translated in English to: I want to live to return.

⁵¹ Translated in English to: I want to live in dignity.

⁵² This reconstruction is based on the fragments collected in several interviews with committee members. Interview with 'Ali, 8 Jul. 2011, Beirut; Interview with Ghassam, 8 Jun. 2011, Beirut; Interview with Fatmi, 13 Jul. 2011, Beirut.

a significant symbolic variation occurred. In the nationalist mythology produced by the PLO, *karama* referred to the first Arab victory ever obtained by Arab fighters against Israeli armed forces in the Jordanian village of Karama and to the general idea of armed struggle. In the slogan elaborated by the organizers of the march, the word “dignity” recalls the living conditions and the economic situation of Lebanon’s Palestinians relating them to the minimum human rights standards.⁵³ Actually, this is the most innovative element of the NGO-produced narrative in comparison to those previously elaborated by the PLO and Palestinian political parties.

Finally, this type of diffusion activity differed greatly from the ones described above because its aim was not only to convey a message or engage in a discussion, but also to overtly oppose the Lebanese mainstream narrative and put pressure on Lebanese institutions.⁵⁴ In this sense, it had an explicitly contentious character, rather than a purely communicative purpose. In terms of the targeted audience, the richness and depth of statistical data supporting the NGO-produced narratives included in the written reports got lost in a single-sentence slogan. This adaptation of NGO-produced narratives, however, allowed for the expansion of the targeted audience, including the mobilised Palestinians and Lebanese who took part in the June rallies. Additionally, the symbolic references mobilised during the demonstrations were further diffused thanks to articles published in the most important national newspapers, such as *al-safir*, *al-akhbar*, *al-liwa*, and *mustaqbal*. Finally, thanks to the connection of the organizers with an Ayn el-Hilwe hip-hop crew, the slogan of the 27 June 2010 march became the title of a downloadable rap song.⁵⁵

In conclusion, the NGO-produced, converging narratives of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon constitute the main sources shaping the discussion at two levels. They set the boundaries of discussion at the level of the policy-orienting/ oriented debate among experts and specialists as well as at the level of the mobilisation practices engaging both Palestinian and Lebanese individuals and Lebanese political actors – such as the parties, the Parliament, and the Government. The potential outreach of the latter practices extends much further than the outreach of the former ones – which only concerned diplomats, politicians, civil servants, and cooperation workers. By widely diffusing the NGO-produced narratives among the refugee population residing in Lebanon, Palestinian NGO activists created a complex narrative based on symbolic references to displacement (i.e. refugee-ness) and emplacement (i.e. the dire

⁵³ For an analysis of the use of the idea of “Dignity” in the Tunisian revolution, see M. Béchir Ayari, “Des maux de la misère aux mots de la ‘dignité’. La révolution tunisienne de janvier 2011”, *Revue Tiers Monde* 2011/5, (Hors série), 2011, 209–18.

⁵⁴ ‘Ali, a member of an NGO who took part in the organization of the rally, used the following words to state the goals of the demonstration: “our goal was to have legislation; this legislation has to go to the Parliament. This was one of the specific goals.” Interview with ‘Ali, 8 Jul. 2011, Beirut.

⁵⁵ Interview with ‘Ali, 8 Jul. 2011, Beirut. Even though I looked for this song myself, I have not been able to find it. About the political relevance of rap music among Palestinians in Lebanon, see N. Puig, “‘Bienvenue dans les camps!’, L’émergence d’un rap palestinien au Liban: une nouvelle chanson sociale et politique”, in F. Mermier & N. Puig (eds.), *Itinéraires esthétiques et scènes culturelles au Proche-Orient*, Beyrouth, IFPO, 2007.

living conditions in Lebanon) of Palestinian refugees in the media and in the intra-Lebanese political debate. From this perspective, its symbolic span – aimed at supporting the reform of the legal framework regulating Palestinians' access to the labour market – was not limited to the economic integration issue, but envisaged a wider vision of the collective existence of the Palestinians in Lebanon struggling with the vision developed by Lebanese political actors to frame the refugees' presence. In this sense, it is possible to speak of the Palestinian NGOs' narrative in terms of what Brubaker called a "diasporic project",⁵⁶ whose "diasporic" nature is presented in the next section.

4. "Dignity" and "Return" as constitutive elements of NGOs-produced diasporic project

As previously mentioned, Palestinian NGO activists formulated a certain narrative about the Palestinian presence in Lebanon to support their demands for legal change and to influence Lebanese decision-making. The symbolic span of the narrative went beyond these demands; it also incorporated a project of collective existence based on a specific process of imagination of the emplacement in Lebanon and of the displacement from Palestine. In this section, I construct an inductive argument in favour of the recognition of the diasporic character of this imagination consistent with Clifford's relational definition of diasporas.⁵⁷

The use of the concept of diaspora is not new in the academic literature on the social and political organization of the Palestinians living outside historic Palestine. Drawing on the early-1990s theoretical debate about this concept,⁵⁸ a number of researchers became engaged in a discussion on the essence of Palestinian displacement outside the Occupied Territories.⁵⁹ Sari Hanafi, Helena Lindholm-Schultz, and Juliane Hammer assert that considering Palestinian communities outside the Occupied Territories through diaspora lenses helps in understanding the political relations – in terms of representation structures as well as of identity construction – between these communities and the host societies without jeopardising the administrative, legal, and moral dimensions linked to refugee status (and to the Palestinians' loss of their

⁵⁶ R. Brubaker. *The 'diaspora' diaspora*, 13.

⁵⁷ J. Clifford, "Diasporas", *Cultural Anthropology*, 9(3), 1994.

⁵⁸ For an overview of this debate, see W. Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return", *Diaspora*, 1(1), 1991; J. Clifford. *Diasporas*; L. Malkki. *Refugees and Exile: From "Refugee Studies" to the National Order of Things*. For an assessment of the diffusion of the notion of diaspora, see R. Brubaker. *The 'diaspora' diaspora*.

⁵⁹ For the most recent works expanding on this debate, see B. Kodmani Darwish, *La diaspora palestinienne*, Paris, Puf, 1997; S. Hanafi, "Rethinking the Palestinians Abroad as a Diaspora: The Relationships between the Diaspora and the Palestinian Territories", *International Social Science Review*, 4(1–2), 2003, 157–82; H. Lindholm-Schulz & J. Hammer (eds.), *The Palestinian Diaspora. Formation of Identities and Politics of the Homeland*, London/New York, Routledge, 2003; J. Peteet, "Problematising a Palestinian Diaspora", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 39(4), 2007, 627–46; S. Hanafi, "Réfugiés palestiniens, citoyenneté et Etat. Vers un nouveau modèle de l'Etat-Nation", in L. Camrézy et al. (eds.), *L'asile au sud*, Paris, La Dispute, 2008, 47–66; A. Signoles & J. Al-Husseini, "Construction nationale, territorialité et diasporisation: le cas palestinien", *Maghreb-Machrek*, (199), 2009/1, 23–42.

homeland). On the contrary, Bassma Kodami-Darwish and Julie Peteet cast some doubts about the adequacy of this concept to describe the pattern of Palestinian displacement for two reasons. First, the demographic, spatial, and temporal characteristics of the displacement of Palestinians do not fit with the constitutive dimensions of diasporas isolated in the theoretical literature.⁶⁰ Second, these authors contend that the labelling of Palestinians as a diaspora has a profound political impact.⁶¹ More precisely, it is contended that the fluidity and inclusivity of the notion of diaspora, as elaborated by post-national and transnationalism theorists, may help conceal the exilic dimension of Palestinians' displacement;⁶² a dimension – signified by the right of return (*haq al-ʿawda*) to Palestine – that occupies a central place in the imagination of Palestinian national consciousness.⁶³

The use of the diaspora concept in all of these works is highly problematic because of the teleological character willingly or unwillingly attached to this concept. Both diaspora supporters and diaspora opponents assume that this concept entails a certain integration of the displaced community into the host one. Starting from this assumption, these authors either contest the political ramifications of integration or try to understate them. Drawing on Lisa Malkki's seminal work about displacement, I propose to address the issue differently. More specifically, I propose setting aside the political ramifications of the use of the term "diaspora" in the Palestinian case⁶⁴ and to look at diaspora/diasporic projects as political means and not as political ends. By doing so, I concur with those scholars who "see the study of the everyday facts of diaspora, movement, and displacement as lens through which to examine the supposedly normal condition of being attached to a territorialized polity and an identifiable people".⁶⁵

4.1. "Dignity" and "Return" as signifiers of the spatialised imagination of the Palestinian diasporic project

The NGO-produced narrative introduced in the previous section hinges on two signifiers: dignity and the dyad refugee-ness/return. But, to what do they refer? To which practices and perceptions? Concerning dignity, it seems clear that the demand for a change of the legal framework regulating Palestinians' access to the labour market aims at the enhancement of Palestinians' economic integration in

⁶⁰ J. Peteet, *Problematising Palestinian Diaspora*, 632–634.

⁶¹ As openly admitted by Julie Peteet, the main issue at stake is constituted by the '... the political ramifications of assuming a Palestinian diaspora ...'. *Ibid.*, 628.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 629.

⁶³ For a synthetic description of the connection between return and identity, see A. Shibli, *The Palestinian Refugee Issue: a Palestinian Perspective*, London, Chatham House, 12, 2009, available at: http://www.voltairenet.org/IMG/pdf/Palestinian_Refugee_Issue.pdf (last visited 12 Oct. 2012).

⁶⁴ Which is, by the way, very much intertwined with partisan preoccupations about the directions taken by Palestinian state-building.

⁶⁵ L. Malkki, *Refugees and Exile: From "Refugee Studies" to the National Order of Things*, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24, 1995, 516.

Lebanon and, subsequently, the improvement of Palestinians' living conditions. The narrative diffused via the written reports and the slogans in the June rally drew on the symbolic reference to dignity to advance the integration of the Palestinian workers in Lebanese economic life. In order to enable this change, however, it proved necessary to invoke at the same time the notions of refugee-ness/return. Without the latter, any modification of the existing legal measures would hardly have been possible because – as already hinted above – of its incompatibility with the mainstream Lebanese narrative about the Palestinian presence in Lebanon embodied in the existing legal measures.

The latter narrative is based on two keystones: the first one is that Lebanon's Palestinians are a security problem and should be dealt with as such;⁶⁶ the second is that any improvement of Palestinians' living conditions facilitates assimilation and their permanent resettlement in Lebanon. As Chaaban *et al.* lucidly pointed out:

Tawteen is the scarecrow that has been used within sections of Lebanese society to generate public phobia against according civil rights to Palestinians. Indeed through editorials in key Lebanese newspapers [...], Lebanese political groups accuse each other of promoting *tawṭyn*, an act tantamount to treason [...] Others (including religious authorities) consider the mere talk of the Palestinians' right to work as being the first step towards *tawṭyn*.⁶⁷

Both of these arguments were called upon to justify the preservation of the existing legal regime regarding Palestinians' access to the labour market. Between June and August 2010, they often recurred in the political debate about the reform of this regime, which engaged Lebanese political parties sitting in Parliament. In concrete terms, Christian parties' MPs repeatedly declared to the press that only humanitarian and social rights – rather than civil rights leading to the naturalization of refugees – should be granted to the Palestinians.⁶⁸ The dispute over the kind of rights to be granted was coupled with the call for the disarmament of Palestinian armed forces inside refugee camps thus showing how intrinsically entangled the Lebanese narrative and the opposition to the reform of the existing legal regime are. When asked about his position concerning the reform, then Labour Minister Boutrous Harb declared: "It's necessary to strengthen the principle that rights go hand in hand with responsibilities when it comes to the Palestinian refugees' relation with the Lebanese state."⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Cf. J. Suleiman, "The Current Political, Organizational, and Security Situation in the Palestinian Refugee Camps of Lebanon", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 29(1), 1999, 71–72.

⁶⁷ J. Chaaban et al., *Socio-Economic Survey of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon*.

⁶⁸ E. Sakr, "Parliament Discusses Granting Basic Rights to Palestinians", *The Daily Star*, 24 Jun. 2010, sec. Politics.

⁶⁹ Quote published on E. Sakr, "Harb: No 'civil rights' for Palestinian refugees", *The Daily Star*, 26 Jun. 2010, sec. Politics.

It is against these arguments – i.e., the mentioning of Palestinian involvement in the civil war and the (dishonorable) loss of the Palestinian homeland to justify the exclusion of the Palestinians from the Lebanese host society – that ‘Ali, Ghassam, and other activists stood up and elaborated their own narrative of the Palestinian community as an economically integrated national minority striving to return to their homeland. In documenting the Palestinians’ lack of dignity⁷⁰ in spite of their contribution to the Lebanese economy through informal labour with statistics, tables, and graphs, Palestinian NGO activists highlighted the advantages of economic integration for both Lebanese and Palestinian communities and legitimised the emplacement of the latter in the economic life of the former. At the same time, the boundary between the two communities was maintained by constantly referring to the Palestinian displacement and right of return.

On the one hand, stressing the fundamental importance of the right of return defused the allegations of facilitating naturalisation formulated by those Lebanese who opposed any reform of the existing legal regime. On the other hand, the claim that the NGOs’ narrative put forward the right of return and called for humanitarian and basic rights *just* to avoid these allegations⁷¹ is not consistent with the perceptions of NGO activists. According to my informants, the mention of return has implications going far beyond the debate taking place inside Lebanon. More specifically, the right of return (as well as the other symbolic references to Palestinian displacement) is not just a rhetorical tool used to end legal discrimination, but a symbolic reference to the actual capability to choose between going back to the Palestinian homeland or not.⁷² Therefore, this connection with the homeland not only serves to demarcate the boundary between the Lebanese and the Palestinians, but it also perpetuates the unifying connection among all Palestinians. In a certain way, the distinctiveness entailed by referring to the right of return contributed to both differentiating the Palestinians from the Lebanese host society and increasing the internal cohesion of the Palestinian (imagined) national affiliation.

In rejecting the dichotomy of naturalization vs. return and putting forward symbolic references to dignity, the NGO-produced representation carved out the main signifiers of a political project aimed at the establishment of a community *in-between*; a community which strives for an enhanced emplacement in the host society and simultaneously cultivates the myth of the end of its displacement from its own homeland.⁷³ As a matter of fact, although Palestinian NGO activists did not openly invoke the notion of diaspora to further their political

⁷⁰ As Youssef, an activist engaged in producing reports, once said: “we don’t want to be weak in our action. We want to have sound figures to diffuse to others organizations and institutions.” Interview with Youssef, 30 Jun. 2011, Beirut.

⁷¹ As claimed in J. Chaaban et al., *Socio-Economic Survey of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon*.

⁷² Interview with ‘Ali, 8 Jul. 2011, Beirut.

⁷³ About the mythical dimensions of diasporic projects, see W. Safran, *Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return*.

projects and to oppose the actual legal framework imposed by Lebanese authorities,⁷⁴ they put forward the notions of refugee-ness, return, and dignity in their attempt to contrast the Lebanese imaginative hegemony anchored in the refusal of refugees' naturalisation on the basis of their perceived threat to security. In doing so, Palestinian NGO activists called simultaneously for assimilation and distinction; they brought about a specific representation of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon hinging on signifiers of – economic – integration (i.e. dignity) and of distinct national belonging (i.e. refugee-ness/return dyad). So, this twofold representation is consistent with Clifford's relational conceptualization of "diaspora", i.e. a "signifier of political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement".⁷⁵ Otherwise said, the NGO-produced representation of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon has a diasporic character because – in demanding a modification of the legal framework constraining everyday economic integration of the national group formed by the Palestinian refugees – it imagines a distinct Palestinian community displaced on Lebanese territory.

5. Conclusion

From this perspective, the imagination of Lebanon's Palestinian presence – and the project incorporated in it – presents one feature equally observed in other imaginative processes of communities that claimed and attained the label of diasporas. This feature is the distinctive tension that opposes Palestinian political and cultural entrepreneurs to the Lebanese ones in the struggle over Palestinian segregation. According to the intentions of Palestinian NGO activists, their political project maintains a distinct Palestinian communal affiliation vis-à-vis the Lebanese one. In this case, however, the struggle is not against assimilationist tendencies coming from the host society. To the contrary, the NGO-produced narrative preserves the sense of belonging to a Palestinian nation through connection to the homeland (implicit in the mention of the right of return) against two exclusivist nationalist hegemonies: on the one hand, the ideology underpinning exclusionary legal and administrative practices carried on by Lebanese authorities; and, on the other, the imaginative processes justifying the Israeli colonial endeavour. In a nutshell, the distinctive tension is designed not to resist assimilation of Palestinians in the host society, but to facilitate it – contrary to what happens in other diasporic projects.⁷⁶ In the case of NGO-produced representations of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon, the valorisation of an exclusive national consciousness of the diasporic

⁷⁴ Contrary to what James Clifford observed in his article about diasporas (cf. J. Clifford. *Diasporas*, 310.)

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 308.

⁷⁶ In the empirical studies used in theoretical debates about diasporas, groups of political entrepreneurs of the diasporic minority resist State assimilatory policies through the valorisation of solidarity networks and imagined identities with the homeland (cf. *ibid.*; R. Brubaker. *The 'diaspora' diaspora*).

community is used to enhance its (economic) assimilation against the resilience of a host society's state institutions.

In response to the initial questions concerning the imagination of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon, the empirical study presented in this article exposes two peculiarities of the diasporic project elaborated by Palestinian political entrepreneurs in Lebanon. First, it not only engages the Lebanese host authorities, the Palestinian displaced community, and the Palestinian homeland; it also involves Israel's colonial policies. Consequently, it entails contentious interactions that cannot be grasped using conceptualisations of diaspora that focus on the relations between homeland, host country, and the diasporic community. In this sense, the empirical study supports Kodami-Darwish's and Peteet's criticisms of the use of the diaspora notion in the Palestinian case. Second, the diasporic projects formulated by Palestinian NGOs' activists exploit the attachment to homeland to partially contrast the segregation carried out by the political authorities that rule over the host societies. Hence, the main object of contention, at least in Lebanon, is the integration of the local Palestinian community rather than the enhancement of its internal cohesion and its connections with Palestinians living elsewhere in the world. This conclusion supports Lindholm-Schultz and Hammer's and Hanafi's use of the notion of diaspora in the Palestinian case.

These peculiar traits suggest that, at least in Lebanon's case, Julie Peteet's warning about the dangers of assuming a Palestinian diaspora blending into the host society may be valid. I wonder, however, how beneficial it would be to discard the notion of diaspora as a politically-laden concept for understanding the social and political dynamics inside and among Palestinian communities living outside the Occupied Territories. As the second peculiarity identified in the empirical study seems to suggest, looking to spatialising imaginations of the Palestinian collective existence as diasporic projects elaborated outside the political "centre" of the Palestinian nation is helpful to partially frame the power relations that occur between the Palestinian communities settled outside the West Bank and Gaza and their host countries. Furthermore, this stance may prove to be helpful in assessing the empirical utility of the diaspora concept in the Palestinian case rather than the other way around.